The WSIS+10 Lessons for Digital Development

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The United Nations Commission for Science Technology and Development (CSTD) is meeting for its eighteenth session in Geneva, 4-8 May 2015 on two themes – strategic foresight for the post-2015 development agenda and Digital Development. Its review of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) outcomes is summarized in the Ten-Year Review Report. Here, adapted from a speech she gave at the meeting, LSE's Professor Robin Mansell reflects on questions such as: to what extent have the WSIS ambitions been achieved since the summit? What has been learned? Why do new digital divides keep emerging?

The WSIS 2003 Geneva Declaration called for 'a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society'. The aim was clear, ambitious, and linked to development: 'enhance opportunities and the quality of life for people worldwide and facilitate sustainable development'. In the opening ministerial panel of the CSTD, speakers focused science, technology and innovation, the need for basic science, internet governance, rights, mapping and monitoring the information society, the integration of digital development into the post-2015 development agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I spoke about the urgent need for investment in capacity building.

There have been many reports and documents on the WSIS outcomes since 2005. They all point to progress: for example, in 2015 around 40% of the world's population goes on line, at least sometimes, which is a huge increase since 2005. Other reports point to the uncertainty created by rapid changes in technology from mobile smart phones, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, to tiny satellites. However, the CSTD Ten-Year Report also points to uneven progress on the affordability of access, in the availability of content and applications; for instance, the proportion of websites registered in wealthy countries is constant at some 80%, and here is talk of new digital divides. The report documents challenges and priorities, and the list is long. Priorities include broadband access, inclusiveness, internet governance, education, cybersecurity, cloud economy, social and economic regulation, sustainability (e-waste), and the need for forward looking and more easily measurable targets. The list of threats is also long – cybercrime, online pornography, violence against women and girls, monopolies, corporate invasions of privacy and tax avoidance. These lists are wish lists from all the stakeholders, but they don't tell us what should be the very highest priority beyond 2015.

Looking backwards

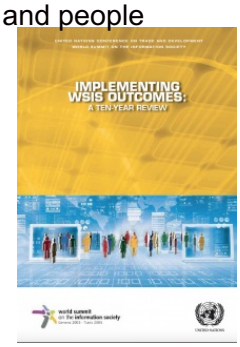
In 1997 I prepared a report for CSTD's Third Session on Knowledge Societies. It said that 'assembling the "tools" is only part of the task … Measures must be taken to assemble the **human capabilities** … to make the best use of the new opportunities offered by ICTs'.

Looking at the present

The CSTD Ten-Year Review Report in 2015 does say a lot about human capabilities and about capacity building. It emphasises not only transforming digital information into knowledge but the need to apply that knowledge – 'the information society is one where information and the use of information – its transformation into knowledge and **the application of that knowledge** – become crucial resources in economic production and social interaction'.

Stakeholders will often agree that investing to achieve universal broadband access is essential, but this is a technical solution to a very human problem. In terms of investment, capacity building is still

being neglected. But it is because of this underinvestment that digital divides persist and people continue to be excluded from their information societies.

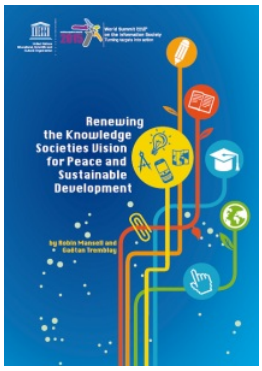


Learning from the WSIS experience

In these WSIS+10 documents there are important lessons. Two stand out:

1) the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) says that 'it is important to have information serving society and not the other way round'. People, their needs and their contexts need to come first. **2)** 'information societies or knowledge societies cannot be constructed on ICTs or on information alone. They are achievements of **human development** built upon a conjunction of human values, technology and innovation' as UNESCO puts it. So, technological innovation is essential, whether it leads to developments in data analytics, the cloud, or broadband access. Essential too is multi-stakeholder governance of the internet and to support fundamental rights and principles. But none of these guarantee better decisions, greater equality, inclusiveness, justice or respect for the dignity and worth of human beings. They have to be matched by capacity building that is worked through in practice.

What does the research evidence-base tell us?



One thing it tells us is that digital technologies are general purpose technologies. Innovations in this area always give rise to uncertainty, as we set out in our report for UNESCO on Renewing the Knowledge Societies Vision.

Responses to uncertainty can result in good and bad outcomes. Crises arising from the need to respond to changes in technology and in society mean that new legislative measures are crucial to achieving fairness, equity and inclusiveness in information societies – of women, the disabled, the marginalized, and the least developed countries. Technological innovation is not going to stop. We are unlikely to see a stable digital world any more than we are likely to see a stable geopolitical world in the short or medium term. Uncertainty and risk are here to stay. Achieving good outcomes means all people need to learn through capacity building strategies – not just the policy makers and the developers of technology, but all digital technology users – the young and the old.

Because of persistent underinvestment in capacity building, there is still evidence of practices that lead to outcomes that marginalize people. For example, a Knowledge and Information Officer said:

> *"When groups are already marginalized it seems to be increasingly that tools like technology become proprietary to certain people. So unless you set things up so the more likely to be marginalized group has access with intent, without that intent you are more likely to increase the fact that they become marginalized".*

Greater emphasis needs to be given to capacity-building for inclusiveness, listening, and giving voice to local communities. This is essential.

An example of a barrier to an inclusive information society is resistance to promoting open technologies and information, as this expert said:

> *"[A dominant software company] has come in pretty hard and said, you know we'll do a free training for all teachers on [company name] products. Well they didn't say that but that is what they'll do, they'll train teachers on how to use [company name] products which is another huge expense if they decide to go that way rather than something open*

> *source".*

To build inclusive information societies, there is a need to invest in openness, collaboration, sharing, and building capacity through open education and open learning:this is essential.

Looking to the future – What should be the highest priorities for 'digital development'?

Achieving inclusive people-centred information societies means giving the greatest priority to three areas and ensuring investment follows:

1) capacity building so that people can choose their pathways in the contexts in which they live;

2) education and building digital literacies, including through vocational training;

3) transforming access to information into **useful knowledge** –knowledge about new ways of working, of interacting socially, and of participating.

To achieve this, policies aimed at digital development need to be main-streamed throughout other areas of policy and practice. Capacity building and learning are needed across all segments of society. If these three areas receive the very highest priority, we hope more realistically that digital technologies including the internet and mobile phones will come to play a catalytic role in the empowerment of women and in achieving gender equity through inclusive participation; that children's rights online start to be better protected; that information societies come to be truly participatory – not just in name, but in practice. This is the only way can we expect digital technologies to be used in entrepreneurial, innovative and welfare-enhancing ways, ways that include and empower.

Looking to WSIS +20

If there is more listening, more engagement with what communities really need and want, and substantially more investment in capacity building of all kinds, when we look back in another 10 years we can hope that: people will finally come first on the digital development agenda, that ICTs will be seen as critical enablers and no-one will see them as solutions and that ICTs will be **embedded in development initiatives explicitly** in key policy areas such as food, water, energy, climate change or sustainability. If the greatest lesson of the WSIS process is learned – the urgent need for investment in capacity building – then information societies could start to be valued by all stakeholders as a much bigger part of the response to the challenging post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs.

This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.